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Pilots beware, Antrim turbines not lit

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Stone Bridge Post

Although local small aircraft pilots are not overly concerned about the absence of most warning lights on the 500-foot turbines on Tuttle Hill in Antrim, aviators should be aware that, as of Tuesday evening, only two red flashing lights are active on two of the nine turbines. All turbines, according to the project's certificate of operation, should have temporary warning lights in working order during their construction phase, as must any object over 200 feet.

Having heard several accounts of how many warning lights are functioning, the Stone Bridge Post took a moment to verify the count. At 7:30 p.m. Tuesday from the expansive view, which some call the million-dollar view, in Deering, from where all nine turbines are visible, only one red light could be seen flashing. At 8 p.m. on Tuesday, from a point of Gregg Lake Road in Antrim, from which all nine turbines can be seen, only one was flashing, but within a couple of minutes another started flashing. Both warning lights remained flashing for the remaining 20 minutes this reporter was viewing them.

Jean-Francois Latour of TransAlta, the company that currently owns the turbines, wrote in an emailed letter to Pamela Monroe, administrator of the State Site Evaluation Committee (SEC), which granted the certificate to permit the project, that they had checked on the lights on Monday, Sept. 9, and found that four of the nine warning lights were not functioning. This was the result of Antrim resident Shelley Nelkens expressing her concerns that not all the warning lights were functioning at the Antrim selectmen meeting earlier that evening.

The emailed letter Latour wrote to Monroe was dated Sept 11. In it, he noted that later in the evening on Sept. 9 TransAlta filed a NOTAM with the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), this is a Notice to Airmen.

"It came to our attention that four of the nine temporary lights were not working. The construction team filed a NOTAM (Notice to Airmen) with the Federal Aviation Authority to notify them of 'an outage of 30 minutes or greater,'" wrote Latour.

Latour also wrote in the same emailed letter to Monroe, "Our contractor has planned to be on site Monday, September 16, to inspect and replace these four lights as needed to ensure proper functioning going forward. The temporary construction lights will remain in place until the commissioning of the permanent lights and associated Aircraft Detection Lighting System later this year."

However, as earlier reported, as of Tuesday evening Sept. 17, only two flashing red lights were seen atop two of the nine turbines.

In another letter to Monroe, several concerned Antrim residents – Richard Block, Shelley Nelkens, Janice D. Longgood, Annie Law and Robert Cleland – stated, “almost all of the towers have been unlit since early June when they stood at approximately one-half of their final height. FAA regulations require all turbines be lit with a temporary steady-burning red light . . . once they reach a height of 200 feet (61 m) or greater.”

The two lights witnessed by this reporter on the evening of Sept. 17 were flashing, not “steady-burning.”

During a Stone Bridge Post telephone interview with Monroe on Wednesday, Sept. 18, during which she was apprised of this reporter only seeing two flashing red lights atop two turbines, Monroe responded, “I need to gather my facts and review the requirements in light of the certificate and determine where it goes from there. I’ve also been in contact with the town attorney.”

Temporary lights are required by the certificate during construction of the turbines, and a permanent Aircraft Detection Lighting System (ADLS) is required by the certificate by the time the turbines begin spinning and generating electricity. The ADLS lights only come on when they detect approaching aircraft, whereas the temporary lights must be on constantly. And the project deadline to begin operation was the end of August. Because the project completion has extended past deadline, a fee of \$50,000 is scheduled to be paid by TransAlta to the Town of Antrim.

Eight of the nine turbines reach 489 feet at the tip of an erect blade. The turbines are also placed on the Tuttle Mountain ridge, giving them even more height to catch the wind.

Although the certificate of operation granted by the SEC requires warning lights atop all nine turbines, area pilots are not overly concerned by the lack of seven out of nine of the lights, considering two warning lights as ample for safety, considering there is also a NOTAM in place.

In regards to how high small aircraft must fly above ground level, Jim Rymes, owner of the small airfield and hangar in Deering, known as the Hawthorne-Feather Airport, notes that the FAA rule says the minimum height is “500 feet. The FAA is very clear about it. . . . Would I prefer a light on every turbine, sure I do. But it’s not necessary and would be overkill. But I have no objection to flying wise and the lights being there.”

Joe Gould, a small aircraft pilot who lives in Antrim, believes the lights should be lit “all the time at night.” He also points out the following, “To clear those turbines with the blades going you have to be at 2,200 feet above ground level from the Deering airport, because of Tuttle Mountain being as high as it is.”

However Gould acknowledges that “most of the people in this area know the turbines are there.” But he goes on to say, “If somebody doesn’t know they are there they could fly into one. But anyone flying at night is going to be using instruments. . . . I would prefer to see them on all the time at night, rather than the ADLS system that comes on automatically. I’d rather see full time lights up there. It makes more sense. There’s always that one chance that someone runs into one.”

However pilots feel about the lack or presence of warning lights, the SEC certificate requires there to be constant temporary lights atop each turbine while in construction, and the fully installed ADLS system once the turbines are in operation.

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